

PEOPLES GAS IRVING PARK NEIGHBORHOOD OFFICE

4839 WEST IRVING PARK ROAD
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

PRELIMINARY STAFF SUMMARY OF INFORMATION

INITIALLY SUBMITTED TO THE
COMMISSION ON CHICAGO HISTORICAL AND
ARCHITECTURAL LANDMARKS
APRIL, 1985

(THIS REPORT ALSO INCLUDES INFORMATION ON THE PEOPLES
GAS SOUTH CHICAGO NEIGHBORHOOD OFFICE, 8935 SOUTH
COMMERCIAL AVENUE. A REVISED REPORT TO COVER SOLELY
THE IRVING PARK OFFICE IS IN PREPARATION.)

PEOPLES GAS LIGHT & COKE COMPANY NEIGHBORHOOD OFFICES:

Irving Park Store
4839 West Irving Park Road

Date of construction: 1925-26

Architects: Hermann V. von Holst, George Grant Elmslie

South Chicago Store
8935 South Commercial Avenue

Date of construction: 1925

Architects: Hermann V. von Holst, George Grant Elmslie

During the early part of this century, the public utilities of Chicago played a significant role in the furtherance of the city's reputation as an innovative architectural center through the high quality of buildings which they erected for their offices and technical facilities. To enhance their public image and to make their outlying office and technical facilities pleasantly compatible with their commercial and residential neighbors, the telephone, gas, and electric utilities engaged the services of some of the city's most prominent architects, including D.H. Burnham & Company, Holabird and Roche, Pond and Pond, and Hermann V. von Holst. Among the most significant of these structures were a group of three neighborhood offices designed and erected between 1924 and 1926 for the Peoples Gas Light and Coke Company, designed by George Grant Elmslie (1871-1952), in association with Hermann V. von Holst. Of the three buildings, the Irving Park and South Chicago offices still survive as significant examples of Elmslie's contributions to Chicago's creative architectural movements as exemplified by the Chicago School of Louis H. Sullivan and the Prairie School of Frank Lloyd Wright. A contemporary of both Sullivan and Wright, Elmslie's work shares an affinity with both schools yet defies specific categorization due to the highly personal quality of his designs.

Free from irrelevant and inappropriate references to previous historical architectural styles, Elmslie developed each building as a fresh interpretation of the function, site, structure, and materials requisite for the individual project, as exemplified by the varied and original treatment of the Irving Park and South Chicago stores.

The construction of the neighborhood offices was part of a city-wide expansion program which the Peoples Gas Company undertook in the 1920s to expand its markets and promote public goodwill in the growing residential neighborhoods of the city. The Peoples Gas Light & Coke Company, which was founded in 1848 to provide central gas service to the City of Chicago, had principally relied on the sale of gas for light-

ing purposes and industrial use to sustain its business during the first seventy years of its operation, but the rapid change from gas to electricity for illumination at the turn of the century forced the company to develop other markets. Under a massive corporate reorganization planned by utilities magnate Samuel Insull, emphasis was placed on the sales promotion of the growing number of gas home appliances including stoves, water heaters, heating plants, and refrigerators. Stores were leased and new buildings were constructed throughout the city by Peoples Gas as showrooms for the new appliances in conjunction with well publicized public programs to promote their use. Each neighborhood store was equipped with a public auditorium where regularly scheduled programs conducted by the company's Home Service Department demonstrated the advantages of gas for cooking purposes, as well as the promotion of other gas appliances for home use.

The principal architect for the Peoples Gas neighborhood expansion program was Hermann V. von Holst (1874-1955), a Chicago architect who had previously designed numerous neighborhood electrical sub-stations for the Insull-controlled Commonwealth Edison electric utility. Born in Germany, von Holst received his architectural training at M.I.T. and after working in the Chicago office of the Boston firm of Shepley, Rutan & Coolidge, he launched his independent architectural practice, specializing in residential projects. His varied career included taking over Frank Lloyd Wright's architectural practice in 1909 after Wright left for an extended trip to Europe, and later a partnership with architect James L. Fyfe which produced a number of dwellings and commercial structures throughout the Chicago metropolitan area. Evidence indicates that Fyfe, rather than von Holst, was principal designer for the firm. Examination of von Holst's later independent commissions show a wide variety of styles and forms suggesting that he may have used the services of different architectural designers in his office.

Von Holst's first designs for the Peoples Gas neighborhood offices executed in the early 1920s varied widely, often deriving from classical sources, such as his terra-cotta-fronted Milwaukee Avenue office, erected at 1522 North Milwaukee Avenue in 1923. For the structures erected between 1925 and 1926, von Holst engaged the services of architect George Grant Elmslie who was given full design responsibility for three neighborhood stores: South Chicago, Irving Park, and Larrabee Street. The two men were officially listed together as associated architects for all three projects.

Elmslie's designs for the Peoples Gas Company offered a sound affirmation of the principles and ideals of Louis H. Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright, and other members of Chicago's turn-of-the-century creative architectural movement, in a period when their precepts were largely held in disfavor by the public and the architectural community. Associated with Louis H. Sullivan for twenty years, beginning as a draftsman and design associate for many of Sullivan's greatest works, including the Schlesinger & Mayer Store in Chicago (1899/1902-03) and the National Farmer's Bank in Owatonna, Minnesota (1906-08), George Elmslie was one of Sullivan's most devoted proteges and was one of the few to thoroughly grasp the basic philosophical significance of Sullivan's work. Unlike many who blindly copied Sullivan as mere style, Elmslie sought to develop his designs as a personal interpretation of the architectural challenge at hand, carefully developing every detail as a part of a harmonious unified composition appropriate to the function, site, structure, and materials required for each project. After leaving Sullivan in 1909, Elmslie entered into partnership with William Gray Purcell and George Fieck to form the partnership of Purcell, Fieck, and Elmslie, which was

re-established as Purcell & Elmslie after the withdrawal of George Fieck in 1912. During the period of this architectural partnership, which lasted until 1922, and his subsequent works executed during independent practice, Elmslie consistently upheld high architectural standards, producing designs which remain as significant work in the development of modern world architecture.

Although Elmslie practiced in Chicago for most of his life, his designs for the Peoples Gas Company are among the few projects he executed in the city. The Larrabee Street store, which was erected at 1608 North Larrabee in 1925, was unfortunately destroyed during urban renewal land clearance of the area in the late 1960s, but the Irving Park and South Chicago stores still remain in excellent condition as important examples of Elmslie's work.

IRVING PARK STORE

Erected in 1926 at a cost of \$81,000, the Irving Park Store was the largest and costliest of the Elmslie-designed neighborhood branch facilities. Sited near the prime "Six Corners" business intersection of Milwaukee Avenue, Cicero Avenue, and Irving Park Road, the location offered excellent potential for the demonstration and sale of gas appliances due to the extensive residential development of the area during the 1920s. Of the three executed Elmslie-designed facilities, the Irving Park store was the only structure to be owned outright by Peoples Gas, the others having been erected by private owners under lease agreements.

Faced with finely detailed Bedford limestone and colorful art-glass, the street front presented a festive, inviting appearance which is as effective today as it was when completed in 1926. In marked contrast to the earth-toned brick and terra cotta which is often associated with Elmslie's commercial designs, such as the South Chicago store, the Irving Park facade is unusual in its use of grey/buff Bedford limestone as the primary cladding material. A fine-grained stone which has the properties of being easily carved or machined into precision slabs and profiles, Elmslie took full advantage of the plastic nature of the material to develop the facade as an expressive sculptural mass. Its composition is a harmonious balance of horizontal and vertical elements, expressive of the structural character of the building and visually defining the relationship of the exterior masonry envelope to the large open interiors within. The strong vertical expression of the sculptured end piers, offset by recessed horizontal expanses of glass and masonry, was a direct expression of the interior structural system, in which steel members carried by the side walls gave clear-span support to the floors and roof for the full 50-foot width of the building, creating large column-free interior spaces.

The identity of the side walls as the primary structural support of the building was expressed in the thickened, vertical treatment of the end piers which were plastically transformed from simple granite slabs at the pedestrian level, into delicately detailed limestone shafts culminating in rich upwardly thrusting ornamental forms above the second story. The powerful verticality of the piers was offset by the broad horizontal expanses of masonry and glass which were carried across the facade by concealed steel members. The result was a well balanced composition which intensified its visual interest through the increased complexity of detail as the height increased.

The generous horizontal expanses of glass on the facade, made possible by the clear-span construction of the building, allowed an abundance of light to enter the

deep windowless interiors. The ground floor was given over to large plate glass show-windows flanking a central recessed entry, framed by thin ornamental bronze. The storefront transoms, as well as the glazing of the second story, are of art glass, representing some of the finest extant examples of Elmslie's work in this medium. Composed of clear and semi-opaque glass, the windows incorporated brightly colored "V" shaped motifs and border squares, which gave a colorful accentuation to both the facade and interior spaces. Brightly colored art glass was also used for the parapet sign panel which was intended for night illumination by concealed electric lights.

The ground floor interior was originally planned as a large showroom for the demonstration and sale of a wide variety of gas appliances offered by Peoples Gas. With the exception of partitioned cashiers' cages for bill payment at the rear, the interiors were completely open with individual display groupings for gas stoves, furnaces, water heaters, refrigerators, laundry fixtures, and even a small wall-mounted fireplace for the demonstration of gas logs. Much of the original trim of the ground floor was removed in later alterations, but the original ornamental plaster beam covers on the ceiling still remain intact. Also still intact is the original wood and iron staircase along the west wall which gave public access to the second-story auditorium. Now occupied completely by offices, the second floor was originally planned as a large 350-seat auditorium where regularly scheduled home economics lessons were offered to neighborhood residents to familiarize them with the features of gas appliances. Although not visible from the street, the ceiling directly over the auditorium area was raised to a high gable carried by exposed steel trusses spanning the full width of the building. Original drawings indicate that the upper walls were simply finished with plaster and wood trim, and that a lunette formed over the stage platform was decorated with a mural painting. Natural light from the large front windows was augmented by skylights with art-glass panels at ceiling level. The upper ceiling area is now completely obscured by a dropped ceiling.

Still owned and operated by Peoples Gas as a neighborhood facility, the Irving Park store has been maintained in excellent condition. With the exception of minor modifications of the storefront and entrance, the exterior still remains largely as originally designed in 1926. As Peoples Gas no longer sells gas appliances or conducts regular home economics programs, the interior has been altered to serve as a neighborhood customer service center and regional administrative office.

SOUTH CHICAGO STORE

The smallest and least expensive of the three Elmslie-designed Peoples Gas stores, the South Chicago store was nevertheless equal to the others in the quality and creativity of its design. Sited in the Commercial Avenue business district of the far south-east side community of South Chicago, the building was custom-built in 1925 for Peoples Gas under a long term lease agreement with Edward Weinberg, the fee simple owner of the property.

Like the Irving Park store, the street facade was treated as an extension of the large unsubdivided spaces within, with concealed horizontal steel members creating a broad horizontal expanse of glass across the width of the building. The strong vertical emphasis of the end piers, offset by the recessed horizontal planes of glass and masonry in between, was similar to the "post and lintel" structural expression of the Irving Park store, but varied widely in detail due to Elmslie's sensitive differentiation between the inherent characteristics of the cladding materials used on the two buildings. While the Bedford limestone facade of the Irving Park store is treated as a single sculptural mass,

with ornament treated as low-relief carved modulations of the smooth exterior skin, the relationship of the textured brick and ornamental terra cotta of the South Chicago store was individually defined, yet unified into a homogeneous composition.

In materials and color, the South Chicago store closely related to much of Elmslie's earlier commercial work, being of light yellow-brown wire cut brick with ornamental terra cotta of a matching color. The identity of the terra cotta as a separate material inset into the brickwork was clearly expressed in the distinct borders which framed each piece, yet the two materials were unified as complimentary clay elements by their matching color. The design of the terra cotta itself is significant as an example of George Elmslie's distinct ornamental style, which is derivative of the work of Louis H. Sullivan, but unique in form and application. The ornamental detailing, particularly on the end piers, was detailed as a plastic manipulation of the surface, with the organic and geometric forms pulling out of the unadorned surfaces. Similarly, the block-like repetition of the individual terra-cotta pieces was clearly expressed in the segmented patterning of the border panels which enframe the upper wall surface. The terra cotta was manufactured by the Northwestern Terra Cotta Company of Chicago, which executed much of Elmslie's terra-cotta work.

In contrast to the elaborate finishes of the interior of the Irving Park store, the South Chicago store was relatively simple in treatment with no custom ornament or decorative finishes. The interior plan combined the salesroom with the public auditorium for appliance demonstration on a single floor. Interior illumination of the deep windowless interiors was supplemented by ceiling skylights, but unlike the more costly Irving Park store, these were plain clear glass rather than decorative art glass.

The building has long ceased to be occupied by the Peoples Gas Company, and it has been successively occupied by several different retail establishments. The facade remains largely as originally designed with the exception of a minor rebuilding of the central recessed entry and the removal of the applied "Peoples Gas Light & Coke Company" sign on the upper wall.

The Irving Park and South Chicago stores collectively represent a unique collaboration of the public utilities and the building arts to create structures which were intended to enhance the neighborhoods in which they were located. Under Elmslie's skillful guidance, the buildings were designed to be attractive and inviting, dispensing with the garishness and gaudy exhibitionism that characterized much of the commercial architecture of the time. Even today, sixty years after their completion, the buildings still attract the attention of passersby, picturesquely distinguishing themselves from their neighbors, yet at the same time they are pleasantly in context with the streetscape. The underlying thought behind their composition was probably best expressed in a passage about business buildings which appeared in a promotional brochure published in 1917 by Purcell and Elmslie:

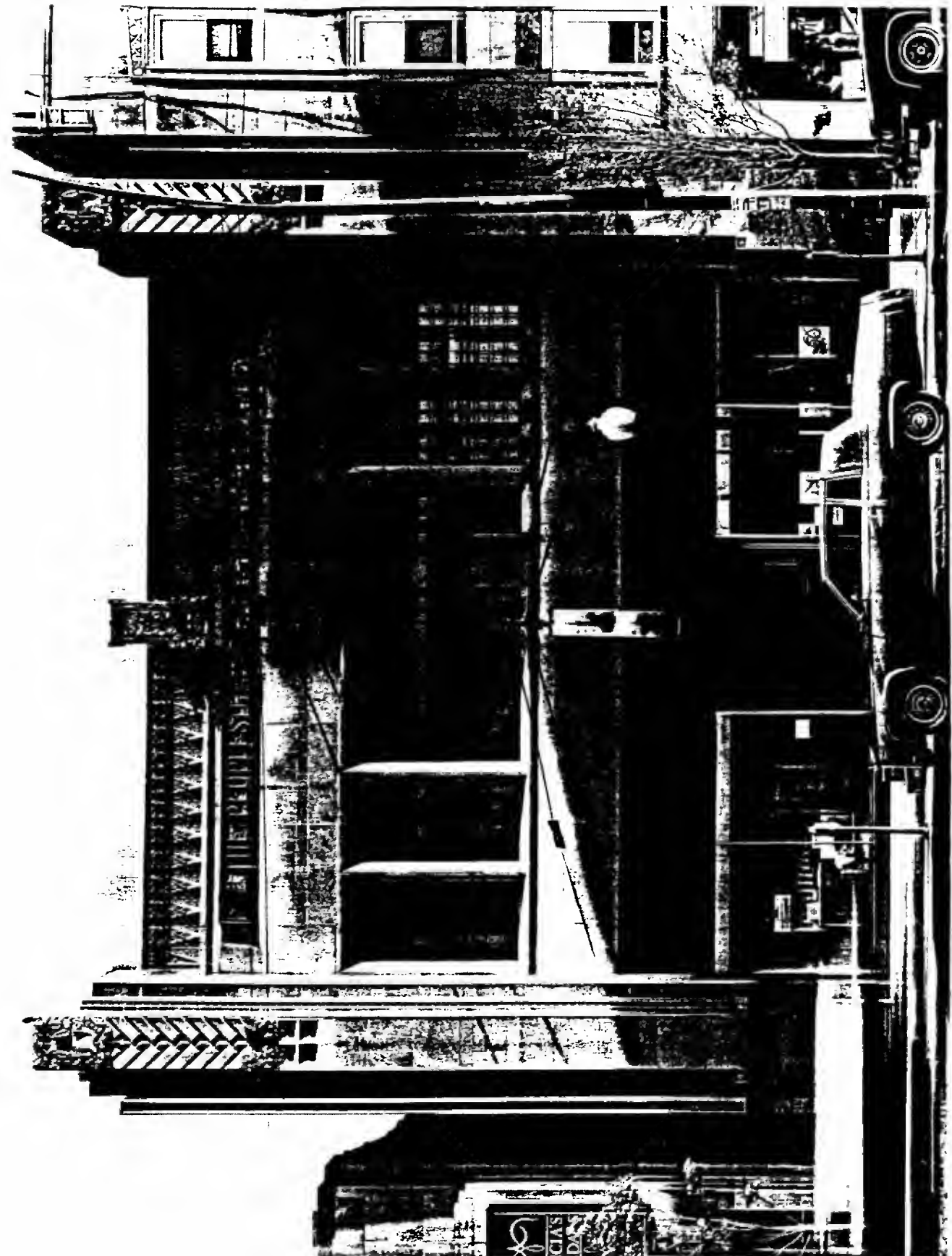
What concerns Purcell and Elmslie is not what a building will appear like, but what it is going to be, out in the rain and sun, among people, attending to its business effectively and being interesting to everyone every business hour of the day.

The buildings for the Peoples Gas Light and Coke Company are Elmslie's best extant work in Chicago. As the final expression of the principles of the Chicago and Prairie school movements in Chicago, they hold a unique and important place in architectural history.

OPPOSITE:

The facade of the Peoples Gas Irving Park Neighborhood Office illustrates George Elmslie's personal interpretation of the architectural philosophy of Louis Sullivan for whom he had previously worked for two decades.

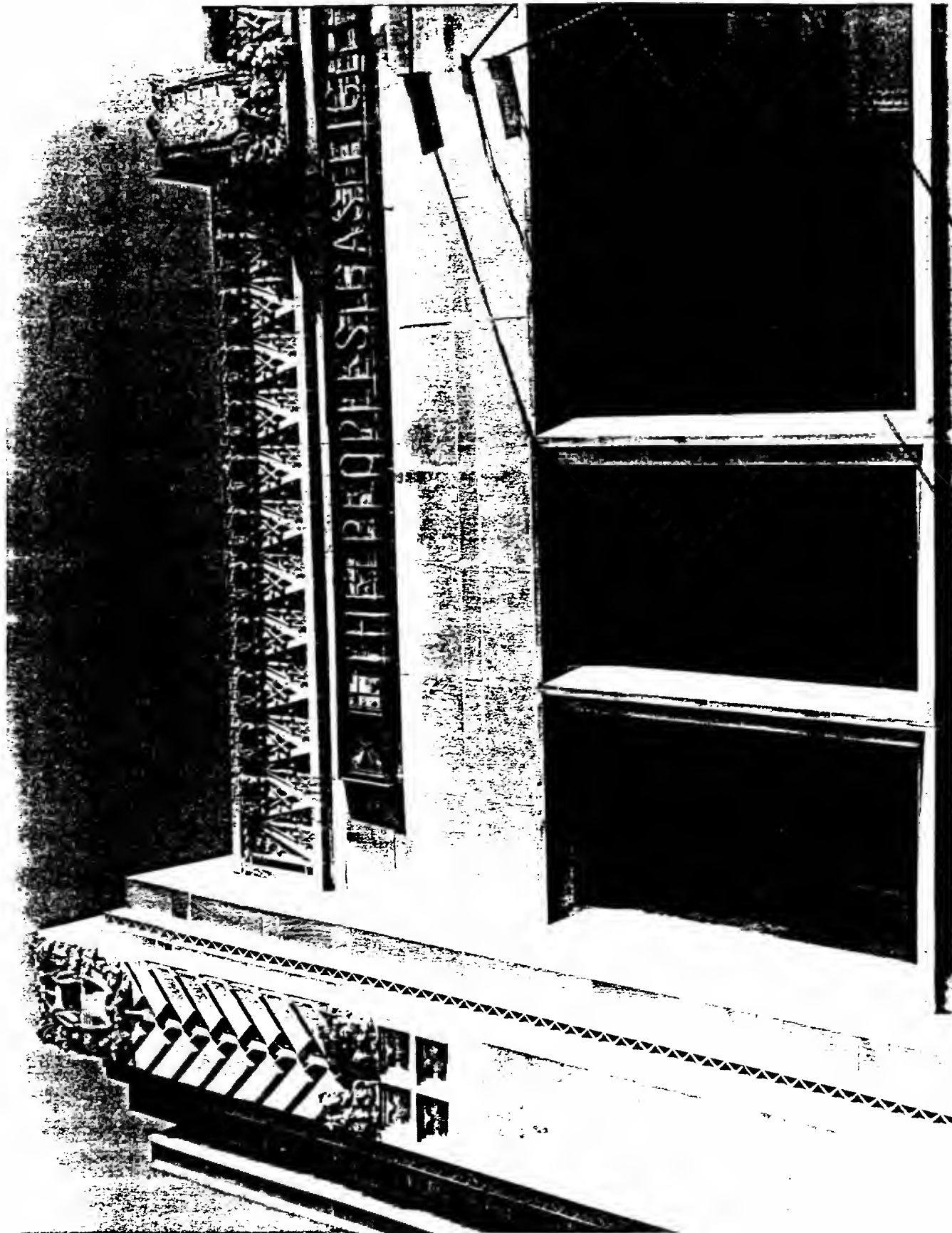
(Bob Thall, photographer)



OPPOSITE:

In his design for the limestone cladding of the Peoples Gas Irving Park Neighborhood Office, George Elmslie took full advantage of the plastic nature of the material to develop the facade as an expressive sculptural mass.

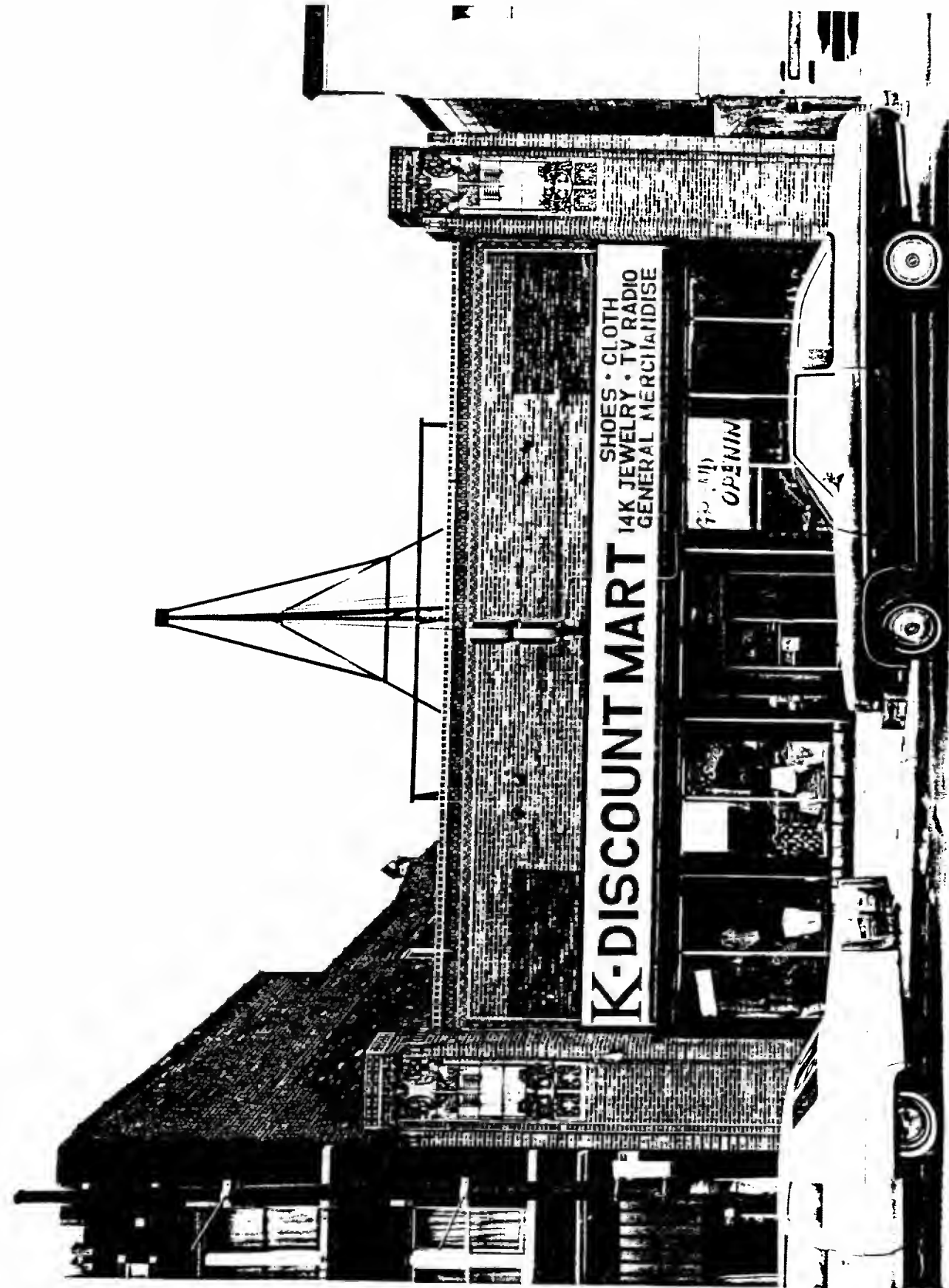
(Bob Thall, photographer)



OPPOSITE:

The form and color of the Peoples Gas South Chicago Neighborhood Office make it a distinctive element on the Commercial Avenue shopping thoroughfare.

(Bob Thall, photographer)



OPPOSITE:

The finely detailed terra-cotta ornamentation on the Peoples Gas South Chicago Neighborhood Office was produced by the Northwestern Terra Cotta Company, which manufactured many of Elmslie's distinctive designs for that medium.

(Bob Thall, photographer)

